

# WITHOUT CIVILITY THERE IS NO LIBERTY

A sermon preached at  
Plymouth Congregational Church  
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**Text: Matthew 5: 21–26, 43–48**

It is my habit on the Fourth of July, whether I am at my home in Maine or here, to read some portions of the Declaration of Independence aloud, to feel in my mouth and to hear in the air the reverberations of liberty that were the borning cry of this nation. As an American, I have, of course, a less than objective ear when it comes to these words, but even so I would, without fear of contradiction here or anywhere in the world, judge them to be among the most noble phrases and most stirring ideas ever proclaimed. As a writer, too, I stand in awe of Mr. Jefferson's accomplishment, which is at once stately and stirring, incendiary and restrained. As a Christian, I am not one who much likes the mixture of patriotism and piety, especially as part of the Sunday morning liturgy. That mixture is toxic when taken in large doses, and sanctuaries that prominently display one or more American flags portray a confusion of allegiances. That said, I know that there are times when you must put away such concerns, and this is one of them. Listen to these remarkable words:

**IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776**

## **The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America**

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

There follows a listing of the grievances that had arisen in the colonies against the British Crown, a review of the fruitless attempts of the colonists to have their grievances satisfied, and the Declaration concludes with these fateful affirmations:

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies,

solemnly publish and declare, That these united Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States, that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. — And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.

Let us pray:

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be ever acceptable in your sight, O God, Our Rock, our Redeemer, and Friend. Amen.*

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Several weeks ago, along with about 120 other church leaders around the country, I signed a “Covenant for Civility,” that was proposed by Jim Wallis at Sojourners. The signatories included people from Chuck Colson and Leith Anderson on the right to Pat de Jong and Anne Howard on the left. There were evangelical megachurch pastors and ministers of high profile progressive churches as well as denominational officials and academics who added their names...a strange-bedfellows assortment, indeed. The covenant surfaced somewhere in the rough wake of the Tea Party movement that has churned our national waters with rallies that feature intemperate speech and demagogic ideas, a not-unexpected product of the anger that roils the hearts of many in the electorate. As my signature and today’s sermon title indicate, I’m for civility. Reminds me of taciturn Calvin Coolidge who returned from church one morning. “How was the sermon?” Mrs. Coolidge, who hadn’t attended, asked. “Fine,” replied the President. “What did he preach about?” “Sin,” came the curt reply. “Well, what did he say about sin?” the exasperated wife asked. “He was against it,” was all she got. So, I’m for civility. You heard it here first. And I’ll take it a step beyond that to say that without civility, we lose our liberty. It’s true that the practice of incivility is a right protected by the Constitution, but it is a right that, if over-exercised, erodes the very liberty on which it stands. Liberty is a social compact, and it is difficult to maintain such a compact between people for whom disagreement slips in to disrespect, and disrespect turns into despising. It is difficult to maintain such a compact when appropriate “rules of engagement” are not widely observed. It is difficult to maintain such a compact when some members of the body politic forsake the tensions of eyes-open reason and ambiguity for the ease and false comfort of blind certainty. The threat to liberty in this country is not in the supposed socialist tendencies of the President, nor, frankly, in the pure free-market theories of the right (remember, you can be a slave to a market as much as to a tyrant), but in the inability of Americans to argue, debate, and struggle with one another creatively, reasonably, and with some modicum of restraint.

That said, let’s note that this isn’t as simple as being “against sin,” or “for civility.” As a spiritual matter, civility is a muddied concept. Even Jesus was somewhat self-contradictory on this.

On the one hand, this is Jesus who said, in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire.

But wait. This is the same Jesus who, later on in the Gospel of Matthew, says to the scribes and Pharisees, who were claiming that you could take an oath on the gold of the temple but not on the temple itself:

You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?

And, to the same group: “Woe to you, you blind guides,” employing a flourish of oxymoronic sarcasm worthy of Bill Maher.

“You hypocrites,” he says again and again to various groups, and, “You brood of vipers!” to some others. In other words, Jesus was no stranger to polemical rhetoric. This is not a man constrained by a fear of offending his adversaries. To be honest, I rather think that civility was not a category that would have occurred to Jesus or his contemporaries, but insofar as it is important to us, we need to recognize that for him, the rules of argumentation were liberal enough to allow for some pretty tough talk. In our own day, we mustn’t equate civility with a fear of using potent language.

Second, we need to recognize that this supposedly simple idea—civility—is often confused with its less noble cousin, politeness, and its second cousin three times removed: Minnesota nice. Civility is often promoted for the wrong reasons by people who are simply conflict-averse, people who cannot stomach strong argument, people who do with their feelings what dogs do with bones: bury them. Civility certainly does not require a ban on passion in the public square, even angry passion. (A word on anger in a moment.) To be civil, one need not lay aside the rhetorical tools of satire, polemics or hyperbole. The symphony of democracy is always played in the key of conflict, and God help us if our national debates devolve into insipid or sentimental comity. Give me an America in which Jefferson and Adams can fight like street toughs, in which Lincoln and Douglas can debate endlessly, in which the rights of the people are exercised on the streets, where the rock of public demonstration meets the hard place of entrenched power. Give me suffragettes determinedly battling male privilege, civil rights workers refusing to go to the back of the bus, even peace marchers shouting, “Hell no, we won’t go.” Spirited, impassioned debate is the food on which democracy feeds; political strife is not liberty’s enemy, but its lifeblood. Civility must not be equated with a docile spirit or a fake amity.

A word about anger. This statement of Jesus: “If you are angry with your brother or your sister, you are liable to judgment,” is problematic in an age when we understand that the repression of anger leads to depression or worse. There is some help in the translation of the Greek version of Matthew’s gospel. In this instance, the verb employed is *orgizesthai*. In Greek, there are two words for anger: *Thumos* is the quick anger that comes from an incendiary situation. *Orge* is long-standing, carefully tended anger: grudge-anger. Of course, Jesus spoke Aramaic, but if the Greek rendering is correct, then he was referring to this latter, long-burning anger, not to the quick flash, the honest emotion. This inappropriate anger is the kind that Frederick Buechner was writing about when he said:

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

But I would suggest that honest, quick, anger is not an affront either to the ethic of Jesus or to the concept of civility. A nursed anger erodes the spirit, poisons the soul. But the flash of

anger against injustice or intolerance...righteous anger...this can clarify the debate and move people forward.

I would suggest that civility in the public square requires three things:

First, civility requires telling the truth. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's famous dictum applies here. "Everyone has a right to their own opinion, but they do not have a right to their own facts." The deliberate manipulation of the facts for rhetorical or political reasons—on either side—is the heart of incivility. It breaks down the ability of opposing factions to debate reasonably because they are dealing with different bases of information. Of course, determining what the facts are can sometimes be difficult, but it is rarely impossible and often pretty straightforward. But if you want to be civil, you can't lie. You just can't.

Second, civility requires the surrender of absolute certainties. All civilized discourse depends on this...this sometimes slight but always necessary breach in the wall of certainty. If that wall is solid, if one's certainty about any issue is unassailable, then what is the point of conversation? You may recall the words of Oliver Cromwell to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland with which he was locked in a fierce struggle. "I beseech you," he wrote, "in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken." If, as Emily Dickinson says, "The soul should always stand ajar," the same may be said of the mind. At times it may be flung wide open; at other times that opening may be appropriately narrowed. But the minute the door is closed, truly closed, then civilization stops, and civility is dead.

Third, civility requires the recognition of one's adversaries as children of God for whom one can pray. One of the most unlikely friendships I can think of was the personal bond between Senator Edward Kennedy and the Rev. Jerry Falwell. The two could not have been more different politically. Their views were sharply in conflict, and that conflict was very public, especially in the 80s when Falwell was the head of the so-called Moral Majority. And yet they had a genuine affection and respect for one another. Kennedy was a dinner guest in Falwell's home, and Falwell was invited to pray with Kennedy's mother, Rose, when she was dying. This is a wonderful model for us. Neither man backed down easily on his views, but out of their personal bond, they were able to speak civilly with one another. At the base of this, each one was able to see the other, regardless of views, as a child of God, deserving respect and love. "Love your enemies," Jesus said, "and pray for those who persecute you." It is, as you must know, very difficult to remain angry with someone you are praying for. The recognition of your adversary as a child of God worthy of respect and your willingness to pray for him or her is a big step toward ensuring civility in your debate.

We who love our country, and we who wish to follow in the way of Jesus will recognize the importance of civility in our national life. We will not abandon our convictions, nor eviscerate our argumentation, but, if liberty is to be preserved, we will—we must—speak the truth in love, have the humility to know that we may be wrong, and engage with our adversaries as beloved children of God. As the song says:

*Oh beautiful for Pilgrim feet,  
Whose stern, impassioned stress  
A thoroughfare for freedom beat  
Across the wilderness!  
America! America!  
God mend thine every flaw,  
Confirm thy soul in self-control,  
Thy liberty in law.*

So be it. Amen.